

# ‘And What Happened Next?’: Emotions and Sexual Violence in Holocaust Interviews

Annabelle Baldwin

## Abstract:

This paper considers the testimonies of four female survivors of sexual violence who gave interviews to the USC Shoah Foundation Institute’s Visual History Archive. For the survivor, talking about this experience (sometimes for the first time since the war) is often one of great emotion and trauma. These women relive their experiences of sexual assault while giving their memories voice, motivated by the desire to put their stories ‘on the record’. In this paper, I focus on four interviews with women survivors and explore ‘what happens next’ when traumatic memories are shared. I consider how emotions from the event are present in the interview, the inevitable intertwining of memories of sexual violence and those of other traumatic Holocaust events, as well as the way the interview space, and interviewer/interviewee interactions within the interview, affect how emotion is expressed and what emotions are experienced. I also consider ethical implications for how oral historians can use these kinds of difficult interviews, particularly when accessing an existing archive of interviews.

## Introduction

Talking about sexual violence and the Holocaust brings up complicated emotions for many women in the Shoah Foundation’s Visual History Archive. The process of giving Holocaust testimony is arguably an emotive process in itself. But talking about sexual violence in the context of the genocide often leads to complex, layered memories of grief, guilt, shame, trauma, anger, pain and anguish.<sup>1</sup> For many survivors, their experiences of sexual violence are intricately intertwined with their Holocaust experiences, and remembering separation from family members, deportations, the people who saved them and even liberation can also mean recalling their memories of abuse and assault.

For Holocaust historians interested in sexual violence, oral history is usually the preferred, and often only, source of information. Some scholars have made use of Nazi documentation, but these records are always perpetrator-centred. These documents have proved fruitful in explaining how Nazi institutions dealt with

sexual violence against Jewish women, particularly the *Wehrmacht* (the German army).<sup>2</sup> However, they tell us very little about the experience of the survivor or about the prevalence of sexual violence, given that most assaults were not reported to Nazi authorities and many that were reported were not prosecuted. Survivor writings, such as memoirs, poetry and other forms of literature, have been fruitful for discussions of sexual violence.<sup>3</sup> In these varied works, survivors discuss fears of sexual violence, moments of vulnerability at camp intake and witnessing sexual abuse against friends and family. While valuable, research utilising written literature and memoirs taps into a small subset of the survivor community with the inclination and ability to communicate their experiences in writing. In light of these evidentiary limitations, the majority of scholars interested in exploring the experiences of Jewish women and sexual violence turn to survivor testimony. Oral testimony allows scholars to gain the insights of multiple survivors, particularly those whose stories may not have been recorded in other forms, offering a breadth of experiences to draw on.

This article is drawn from a larger study investigating survivor testimonies discussing sexual violence collected by the USC Shoah Foundation Institute between 1994 and 1999. Holocaust testimony projects are often large scale, but the Shoah Foundation’s venture is the largest collection of audio-visual interviews in the world to date. The Foundation’s Visual History Archive (VHA), its digitised database and testimony repository, houses nearly 52,000 interviews with Holocaust survivors. The testimonies were collected in the mid-1990s across 56 countries and in 32 different languages, creating an archive of rich and varied survivor stories. The project was famously begun by Steven Spielberg following the critical and commercial success of his Holocaust film *Schindler’s List* (1993), leading to his establishment of the Foundation (initially known as the Survivors of the Shoah Foundation) in order to record the stories of as many Holocaust survivors as possible. The Foundation’s ambitious goal of 50,000 interviews by the year 2000 was reached and surpassed, with the resulting testimonies preserved in digital format and made available via institutional subscription around the world.<sup>4</sup>

The Shoah Foundation is not without its critics, and its approach to testimony collection and interview procedure has certainly influenced the way difficult stories are told within the VHA.<sup>5</sup> The interview process was heavily regulated by the Foundation: interviewer guidelines gave pages of instructions to the volunteer interviewers to ensure consistency between testimonies.<sup>6</sup> The interviews were to follow a particular narrative arc: pre-war life in Europe, wartime persecution and postwar regeneration.<sup>7</sup> This prescribed format led to a structured interview, and necessitated an 'interventionist interviewer' who directed the flow of the discussion.<sup>8</sup> While some interviewers are less intrusive than others, the general prescriptiveness of the interview process has largely resulted in fairly guided and interviewer-heavy testimonies. The discussion of sensitive, emotional topics, such as sexual violence, are directly impacted by this, as this article shows.

In this article, I consider the testimonies of four women survivors who conducted interviews with the Shoah Foundation between 1995 and 1997 in the United States.<sup>9</sup> The testimonies are drawn from a much larger study on sexual violence against Jewish women during the Holocaust. For this project, I watched all 989 English-language interviews conducted by and stored in the digital archive of the Shoah Foundation that were indexed with sexual violence keywords.<sup>10</sup> My work is an archival study of the narratives of sexual violence in the VHA, and considers not only what we can learn about sexual violence through these testimonies, but also how these stories are shaped by the institutional context of the interviews, the way survivors have interpreted and reinterpreted their experiences of sexual violence and their decisions to talk about these memories to the Shoah Foundation.

Talking about sexual violence during the Holocaust is never easy. For some of the women in my sample, the interview with the Shoah Foundation is the first time they have spoken about these experiences after four decades of silence. Others use the interview as a chance to tell their families (who will receive a copy of the videotaped session) the truth of what happened to them during the war years. These discussions are typically painful, distressing, grief-provoking and difficult for the women. These are not uncommon emotions in Holocaust testimonies, and previous scholars have noted the intricate and complicated layers of trauma survivors carry in their interviews.<sup>11</sup> However, the untold nature of many of these stories, and the absence of those like them in Holocaust historiography, which had only just begun to probe gendered experiences in the 1990s, made stories of sexual violence particularly difficult for women to disclose. The interviews are thus loaded with different layers of emotion: that of the initial assault, the cumulative distress of living with the experience for decades before the interview, and the emotion of retelling the story in the interview setting,



Jewish men, women and children from Hungary are separated for selection on the ramp at Auschwitz II-Birkenau, 1944. Credit: Auschwitz Album, Yad Vashem. The full album can be viewed at: [https://www.yadvashem.org/yv/en/exhibitions/album\\_auschwitz/index.asp](https://www.yadvashem.org/yv/en/exhibitions/album_auschwitz/index.asp)

all wrapped in the larger, traumatic narrative of their Holocaust experience.

In this article, I discuss how women's testimonies about sexual violence are infused with emotion. The testimonies demonstrate the embodiment of past emotion in the survivors' present, as they recall traumatic memories of sexual violence. They show how emotions can be created within the interview space, either through the act of recollection or due to the interaction with the interviewer. I argue that memories and narratives of sexual violence during the Holocaust can express tangled emotions that make remembering and talking about these events particularly difficult in the present.

### **'You are beyond your own help': Past emotions are also present emotions**

Recalling trauma means talking about emotions experienced in the past, but it can also mean reexperiencing that pain. In his pivotal work on Holocaust testimony, Lawrence Langer argues that survivors are not 'reviving' their memories of traumatic experiences in their interviews: 'There is no need to revive what has never died'.<sup>12</sup> Holocaust survivors live with their complicated memories constantly, and the interview space becomes a place where not only memory is shared but also emotion.

A key example of this is Esther G.'s testimony.<sup>13</sup> In 1944, Esther was sent to the Skarżysko-Kamienna labour camp in Poland when she was seventeen years old. This camp has become infamous for the rampant sexual violence perpetrated against Jewish female prisoners by not only the guards, but also the German

camp commanders.<sup>14</sup> The camp was an armaments manufacturing site and Esther worked building light armaments. After another prisoner's smuggling plan was detected, the prisoner framed Esther as the one who gave him the contraband bullets found in his possession, to protect his lover and as revenge for Esther's rejection of his romantic overtures toward her. The German commander of the facility, Fritz Bartenschlager, soon uncovered the lie and shot the two offending prisoners.<sup>15</sup> But he did not allow Esther to return to work either. He told Esther that she was very beautiful and, as a young woman, probably wanted to live. But he 'can't resist me,' Esther says, tugging at the collar of her blouse. He molested her in the office of the interrogation, then blindfolded her and took her down to the mines, known to the prisoners as the 'death department'.<sup>16</sup> He then forced her to stand at a weighing station and measure out gunpowder for bullets for three days and nights without sleep. She managed to do this without making any mistakes, so after three days, he let her go back to her work detail.<sup>17</sup>

Esther's terrifying experience is recounted in quiet detail in her testimony. She describes her molestation carefully, and both her physical pain and her emotional anguish are evident:

And he took his right hand and twist my breast. [Whispers] The left one. [Pause] It hurt more than any pain can hurt because it's not only the physical pain from it. It is the moral. It is the crucial – everything is taken from you away. And you are beyond your own help.<sup>18</sup>

Her emotional distress at the time of the assault is clear, but so too is her anguish as she recalls the event in her interview. This is particularly evident through her frequent use of the present tense. She begins in the past tense, but slips into the present tense when referencing the psychological distress she felt while being abused. The present tense demonstrates her mental state in this moment of the interview: the pain is not past for her but continues in the present. She whispers when telling the interviewer how he grabbed her body and her voice is strained. Her description is filled with pauses as she swallows before continuing.

Esther's testimony demonstrates present emotion not only in her words, but also in her physical presence. Body language can be particularly instructive in oral history interviews. Audio-visual interviews allow the viewer not only to hear the words spoken and the changing qualities of the narrator's voice, but to place this in the context of their physicality. In Esther's interview, her movements indicate a physical connection with the memory of her assault. When beginning her story about the officer, she pulls on the collar of her blouse, obscuring the microphone for a few seconds. A minute later, as she says, 'twist my

breast', her voice raises in pitch, indicating her anxiety at the memory. The next few words – 'The left one', are whispered faintly, and her right hand clutches at her left breast. Her movements in placing her own hand on her breast indicate not only what the German officer did to her but also an attempt to protect herself. Her mirroring actions indicate the embodied nature of the memory.<sup>19</sup> Memory of traumatic events is not only embedded in our minds as words and images, but also as physical feelings. As Esther describes her assault, she remembers his touch; her movements mimic his, whilst also seeming to protect her from the remembered feeling. Within the interview space, as Esther demonstrates the physicality of her memory, both the interviewer and the viewer – removed from the scene in time and space – witness this connection between the past traumatic event and the present emotional retelling.

Within the interview space, when listening to and watching Esther speak, it is clear that while what she is recounting is in the past, what she felt then continues to be felt in the interview. Her physical discomfort and movements hint at physical pain echoing from her experience fifty years before. While her sense of self may have been restored in the ensuing years since her assault, the feeling of having everything stripped away still haunts her and recalling it means not only giving voice to her memories but also physically remembering what happened to her.

Survivors of sexual violence often experience feelings of guilt or shame after the assault. They sometimes blame themselves for being attacked, or for not being able to prevent or stop it.<sup>20</sup> These feelings are present for Holocaust survivors who experienced sexual violence, but their responses are also entwined with their guilt and identity as a Holocaust survivor. That these women were assaulted during the Holocaust adds an additional layer of complex emotions. Not only do they need to come to terms with being violated sexually, but also with all the horrors of the genocide and the loss of family members and their former lives.

For Eva G., the memory of the attempted rape she suffered on the train on the way to Auschwitz is tied to her guilt about the death of her sister. Eva, 15 years old, and her 13-year-old sister, Vera, were deported from Sered concentration camp in Czechoslovakia to Auschwitz in 1944. As they boarded the train, the sisters were reunited with a man who had been a friend of their parents. He joined the pair in the wagon and helped them on the long journey. He invited the sisters to lean on him in the cramped cattle car and encouraged them to think about their parents rather than paying attention to the desperate fighting occurring in the crush around them. But as their journey neared its last day, the man tried to rape Eva. Vera was sleeping and did not know about the assault, but Eva physically

withdrew to the other side of the wagon. Feeling that she could not burden her younger sister, Eva emotionally withdrew from her also and would not tell her what had happened. This physical and emotional distance led to an argument and, when they arrived at Auschwitz, Vera tried to escape from her sister. Remembering her mother's instructions when they last parted that Eva was to be 'the big one and look after her, whatever happened', she clung to her sister on the crowded platform. During the selection, where fit, able-bodied Jews were sent to work and children, the elderly and the weak were sent to their deaths, Eva was sent to the right, to work, and Vera, left and to the gas. Eva asked to remain with her sister, but, still angry about the train journey, Vera eagerly joined the group destined for death.<sup>21</sup>

In the case of both the attempted rape on the train and her separation from her sister, Eva's testimony emphasises her feelings of helplessness and isolation. The abuse had made her 'grow up overnight': she was no longer the person she had been before. She was unable to explain the abuse to her sister: 'So the man was gone, and I made my way back to my sister, who was not speaking to me. I couldn't explain, she was so much of a baby, I couldn't explain anything to her. And we left the wagon, very, very angry with each other.'<sup>22</sup> Her inability to explain herself to her sister is the focus of Eva's testimony here – a self-imposed silence intended to not only spare Eva from putting her abuse into words, but to protect her sister.

Similarly, Eva's description of the moments following the separation from Vera focuses on helplessness:

And in a moment, she was free of me and ran and she ran away happily. [Twelve second pause] [voice shaking] Um, I guess what happened next, it was intensive and so incredibly alien that it kept me too busy to try and find out [what happened to Vera]. And I recall being stripped of that pitiful suitcase. On my mind was one thing, that I had her things. How would she get her things? Well that didn't take long to be clarified.<sup>23</sup>

Vera's elation at being free from her sister becomes an image of her running happily to her death in the gas chambers, while Eva was forced to proceed alone to the work camp. Eva's inability to save Vera mirrors her vulnerability to the abuser in the train. She could not protect her sister, as her mother had insisted she should, just as she could not stop the older friend from assaulting her in the wagon.

Eva's memory of emotional pain caused by her sexual assault is complicated as it is also the despair of losing her sister. Eva struggles to reconcile her own survival with her sister's death. Her own natural mental anguish

about being almost raped by a family friend in a cattle car needs to be tempered, in her mind, with the fact that her sister was murdered the same day and as the 'result' of the molestation. In fact, Eva qualifies her story about the assault by saying 'I'm telling you this because it's very important to what happened later.' She tells the story to explain the separation from her sister. The moment of recollection in the interview is where Eva reveals the twisted, double-trauma of her initiation into Auschwitz. She cannot remember or talk about her sister without also recalling the attempted rape she suffered. While Eva is emotionally controlled for most of the time while talking about this experience, the end of this story leads her to take a 12 second pause, before shakily continuing to describe the routine of showering and shaving inmates. In those minutes of silence, Eva pulls her emotions back before they spill over in the interview, holding her gaze on the interviewer and then dropping it to her lap, sadly shaking her head.<sup>24</sup>

Further complicating Eva's memory is that her experience of sexual abuse is not only tied to the death of her sister but to an iconic Holocaust event: the arrival at Auschwitz. This event is a frequent touchstone in not only testimony but also Holocaust representations such as film, as well as in scholarship. As such, for many survivors, their arrival story is a frequently told one. In order to tell hers, Eva must either tell the story of her sexual assault or edit that story out. In either version, she is remembering not only Auschwitz, but also her sister's death and the attempted rape. Holocaust and gender scholar Joan Ringelheim terms this 'split memory'. Survivors (and scholars) of the Holocaust struggle to reconcile experiences of sexual violence within the context of their other Holocaust memories. Sexual violence seems unimportant to the overall story of Holocaust because it is often absent from both scholarship and from survivor narratives, writes Ringelheim.<sup>25</sup> But when common aspects of Holocaust narratives involve sexual violence, separating them can be a problem. Eva's example demonstrates how memories of sexual violence during the Holocaust are frequently tied to other painful memories, such as the death of family members, which make them all the more difficult to live with.

#### **'You're speaking of what happens now, just right now?': Emotions created in the interview space**

While Esther's and Eva's stories are of emotive memories, we know as oral historians that emotions can be created in the interview space as a result of the interaction between the interviewer and the interviewee. In the previous two examples, the interviewer was more passive; allowing the survivor the space to talk about and express their pain as they recalled their memories. But the next two interviews demonstrate that the act of recalling memories of sexual violence during the Holocaust during an interview can itself generate new emotions.

Survivors of sexual violence conducting interviews with the Shoah Foundation faced a complex decision before and during the interview as to whether they would reveal these particular memories. Thus even the spectre of the interview would likely have engendered stress in many interviewees. For Irene B., contemplating giving testimony brought on considerable stress. Irene B. and her mother, Helena, were members of a Yugoslavian partisan group in Serbia. There was a fight between their group and *Četnici*, a Chetnik nationalist guerrilla force, and Irene and her mother were arrested by the nationalists and taken to a prison in Vlasotince, Serbia. Irene and Helena had false identity papers, so they were not detected as Jews and were imprisoned as partisans. In the Yugoslav prison, she was raped multiple times by the head of the Chetniks, every day for the year that she was imprisoned. Eventually, the Chetnik organised for her to be transferred to a German facility, so that he would not have to kill her, and in the second prison she was raped again by a German soldier named Franz. After managing to be released from German custody with the help of a friend with further false papers who vouched for the women, Irene was raped by a third man, a soldier she had never seen before, who accosted her on a street and pushed her into an abandoned house and raped her. Irene struggles while recalling her memories of her time in the Chetnik prison, where she witnessed the daily torture of other inmates while in solitary confinement, waiting for her rapist to return to abuse her again.<sup>26</sup>

Towards the end of this long and difficult interview, her interviewer, a man named Burton Leiser, asks her to reflect on ‘how it feels to reminisce about these events that you, in a way, have put out of your mind for so many years and... what it’s been like for you to do this.’ Irene clarifies, ‘You’re speaking of what happens now [in the interview], just right now?’ ‘Yes,’ says Leiser. She immediately responds, ‘Devastating.

Absolutely devastating.’ Irene then talks about her initial contact with the Shoah Foundation and agreeing to give an interview, knowing that would mean talking about these painful experiences:

And after I hanged up from her [the representative from the Shoah Foundation], I received a migraine headache, which I never have headaches, almost never. The headache is still with me going on. And my stomach was terribly upset and I started reminiscing... And I started saying, ‘I can’t go through that [talking about the Holocaust], that’s too devastating for me! What am I doing! How can I play with my mind, going back something I have put away for fifty-five years? I don’t want to think about it... I had a couple of sleepless nights and when you called me [the interviewer] [pause] I chickened out. I decided I *cannot* go through with that. I just can’t... you’ll be such an effect on me, having sleepless nights, starting all over, thinking [about] what I went through, when I shelved that away for 55 years. ... And it’s buried very much. In my head, somewhere. And there is a big something pressing against it.’<sup>27</sup>

In this passage, Irene honestly reveals the mental blocks she has consciously and unconsciously put in place to protect herself from her memories. When thinking abstractly about giving an interview, the idea seemed bearable – ‘I’m a very happy person’, she tells her interviewer minutes before this exchange. ‘I have a very relaxed life.’ But as soon as she made concrete plans to talk about her memories, she experienced considerable physical and psychological torment. These symptoms echo her description of her physical condition when imprisoned by *Četnici*, where she was raped daily by the head of the facility. At that time, she also had stomach pains, sleepless nights and terrible headaches. Her body’s stress response to being forced to remember as she made plans to give an interview mimicked the physical torment she suffered for a year while in this prison.

The physical pain was so much that, after many sleepless nights, Irene called to cancel her interview. She compared talking about her experiences, particularly the multiple rapes, to ‘playing with my mind.’ But she changed her mind again while speaking with the Foundation. She says to Leiser, ‘And in a way it’s okay. In a way it’s good to get it out... Maybe I will get now a release... Maybe it will be good for me. I don’t know.’<sup>28</sup> Searching for catharsis, she gave a candid interview that she planned to show her children, to whom she had never confided previously about the rapes. She does not say in her interview whether she feels she made the right decision but hopes she will be able to put her memories to rest.



Jewish women and children from Hungary disembark the train at Auschwitz II-Birkenau, 1944. Auschwitz Album, Yad Vashem.

Many interviewees report using the interview as a way to talk about and, perhaps, to make sense of, their difficult memories. While the interview space cannot 'heal' a traumatized survivor of violence, it can be a way for survivors to give voice to memories that haunt them and an audience to hear of their suffering.<sup>29</sup> Although the Foundation did reach out to the survivors following the interview, and provided them with copies of their interviews, the viewer watching the interview has no way to know whether talking about her experience did help Irene.

Irene's example demonstrates the power of the interview process to contribute to an interviewee's strong emotional reaction when remembering traumatic memories. She had thought her memories, while painful, would be innocuous but discovered that the process of even contemplating giving an interview was sufficient to elicit psychological and physical responses. Her testimony demonstrates the potency of the interview as a space for creating its own emotions, not only as a place to discuss events and suffering that have passed. In addition, her own reflections on her thoughts about giving testimony demonstrate the need for oral historians to think about the interview in terms of process: the before, during and after effects of questioning.

Oral historians are acutely aware of their impact upon the interview and are particularly conscious of the effect that they have on the interviewee with the questions they ask. As interviews are a co-created source, the dynamics in the interview space impact upon the direction of the interview. An interviewee who is not at ease with the process or their questioner may refrain from disclosing difficult memories, especially if they do not feel the interviewer will be supportive.<sup>30</sup> When a survivor talks about sexual violence in a Holocaust interview, the reaction of the interviewer is crucial to how comfortable the interviewee feels about this revelation and how much of their experience they will share. In my larger project, I observed a number of survivors who disclosed their abuse in the interview and who received far from supportive reactions: silence, gasps, awkward throat clearing and the eventual stilted question, 'So what happened next?' Confronted with unsupportive and uncomfortable interviewers, survivors may ultimately feel that the Shoah Foundation, and perhaps historians in general, are not interested in their experiences of sexual violence during the Holocaust. They generally move on with their stories, but the lack of interviewer reception to painful topics lingers in the following discussion. For others whose interviewers did ask follow-up questions, the way the interviewer approached this delicate topic determined how comfortable the survivor felt and sometimes how much detail they gave about their experiences. Survivors with a strong rapport with their interviewer engaged

in reflective discussions about their experiences and their memories of them.

In the interviewer-interviewee relationship, oral historians are well aware of the power they hold.<sup>31</sup> The interviewer is the one who arranges the interview, decides on the questions, operates the equipment and, ultimately, controls the end product – the recorded interview. Oral historians writing about the issue of power and inequality in the interview relationship have recognised the need for caution in how the interviewer proceeds when the dynamic is unbalanced. This is especially true in situations where the subject of the interview can be traumatic. Being insensitive to the limits an interviewee places around difficult topics can cause further emotional pain to survivors who are already suffering.

The last example is of an interview that failed the interviewee in an emotional sense. Erica C. prefaces her story by saying, 'I really don't want to talk about it. But I will.' She tells her interviewer that while still living in Vienna after the *Anschluss*, she was gang raped repeatedly by members of the Gestapo. She says the authorities required her to report to them three times a week from 1938 until she escaped to Switzerland in 1940. Every time she reported to the Gestapo headquarters, she was taken to a special room and gang raped by multiple German men. On several occasions in the interview, Erica says she cannot talk about the details. The interviewer, Juliet Halpern, asks clarifying questions in the first instance, which Erica responds to. There is then a break to change tapes. After the tape change, the interviewer attempts to extend the discussion of sexual violence, including asking questions about how Erica dealt with the experience psychologically, how it affected her marriage and how she told her family about what happened to her. Erica repeatedly states her reluctance to talk about the experience:

INTERVIEWER: Can you describe how this event happened?

ERICA C.: How – What?

INTERVIEWER: How this event happened to you? The second time you went?

ERICA C.: [Ten second pause] I can't do that. [Looking to right, then turns head looking up and slightly left] There is no way that I can go into details about this [slight shake of head]. I can't.

INTERVIEWER: Okay. Just, you were told to go to another room?

ERICA C.: Mm-hmm.

INTERVIEWER: What did you think? You didn't know?

ERICA C.: Didn't see anything. They asked me to get undressed, and I didn't. So they pulled my clothes down. Not all of it, just some of it. [15 second pause, Erica stares at the interviewer.] I can't help more – I can't tell more. Can't. Sorry. [Pause] It's just too personal. [Frowns] Too hateful.

INTERVIEWER: What, ah– Do you remember being frightened? Screaming? Crying?

ERICA C.: [Slow nod] I sure do. [Ten second pause, looking to the left, unfocused. After pause, Erica sighs, refocuses and turns her head back to the interviewer.]

INTERVIEWER: What happened when you had to go the next time?...<sup>32</sup>

After this exchange, the interviewer asks for information about what happened when she reported to the Gestapo. Erica's body language – long pauses, looking away from the interviewer for extended periods and frowning – makes clear her discomfort with the line of questioning and several times she says that it is 'too personal' and that she cannot talk about it. Later in the session, the interviewer again interrupts Erica to return to this story and to ask for more detail. Erica reveals her son told those who attended her synagogue what happened, as a way to tell her children and grandchildren about her trauma. Halpern asks Erica to expand on this:

ERICA C.: I wanted them [my children], and grandchildren, to hear, for the first time, what happened to me. And I did tell that, in front of all the people. Didn't go into details like you're asking me to. But I did tell them. [Pause, sniffs.]

INTERVIEWER: And you were able to?

ERICA C.: Not into details. As a matter of fact, I did not talk about it. My son went up on the stage, Steven. I could not talk about it anymore. And I don't want this to happen now. So he went up on the stage and he told about that part.<sup>33</sup>

During the interview, Erica could not be clearer here that she is uncomfortable with discussing the details of her multiple gang rapes. Her body language is hostile, her voice incredulous when the interviewer returns to the subject repeatedly, and she specifically states that she does not want to talk in detail and is unhappy with the direction of the interview. Yet the interviewer continues to bring up this experience. While the detail of the questioning means that the viewer has a far better understanding of what happened to Erica, and

how this has affected her life, this knowledge comes at some cost to the survivor, who felt compelled to answer questions against her wishes. Potentially, Halpern may have believed she was working within the guidelines of the Shoah Foundation's project here: their interviewer guidelines make clear the need for specificity and concrete details, encourage the interviewer to ask '*probing questions* [to] elicit information in greater depth, and... [to] ask the interviewee to reflect upon events'.<sup>34</sup> Literary scholar Dawn Skorczewski discusses a similar Shoah Foundation interview, where the interviewer presses for details about sexual violence that the survivor was not prepared to give. She argues that such a moment destroys the relationship between the interviewer and interviewee, to the point where the camera becomes voyeuristic, witnessing the very emotion that the survivor did not want to display.<sup>35</sup> Certainly, in Erica's interview, the repeated returning to the issue of sexual violence causes a breakdown in the rapport between the interviewer and interviewee.

Erica's testimony is extremely uncomfortable to watch. A survivor who brought up her traumatic experiences in order to have them on the 'historical record' is ignored in her requests to stop the questioning and probing for details. Skorczewski likens interviewers in such scenarios to detectives, 'enact[ing] a discursive situation in which detectives pursue the facts of a crime. They are positioned as knowing experts whose inquiries shape the narratives of the events.'<sup>36</sup> In the examples Skorczewski uses, the interviewees push back against their interviewers' attempts at more details and refuse to answer. Erica attempts to do this at first, but, under the continuing barrage of questioning from Halpern, she does eventually provide more detail. We can see in Erica's testimony a clear example of an uneven power relationship being exploited.<sup>37</sup> Although she does not want to answer because recalling the details is emotionally too hard, Erica does because she feels obliged in the context of the interview. Sitting in front of an interviewer, a videographer and a camera, in that moment she felt that she could not push back and refuse to talk. This is a particularly problematic element of the interview. In these exchanges, Erica's emotional state has become irrelevant to the quest for details.

By pushing for details that Erica does not want to give, Halpern denied Erica the agency to determine which aspects of her story were told and recorded in the interview. Oral historians have long been concerned about protecting our narrators from the ill effects of retelling difficult stories and have argued that a key way to do this is to ensure the interviewee has a measure of control over how they tell their own story.<sup>38</sup> Reflecting on his extensive work with Holocaust survivors, Henry Greenspan has observed that scholars should view silence and speech as acts of agency. "'Choose" is the key word,' he writes.<sup>39</sup> In

Erica's interview, her agency is clearly displayed in her careful decision to tell her family and community, and likewise in her choice to give the broad strokes of her story to the Shoah Foundation. But this agency is then removed, and Erica's wishes silenced, by the interviewer's insistence that they continue to talk about the topic against the interviewee's expressed wishes.<sup>40</sup> In Erica's interview, the emotional display is not only the pain of recollecting traumatic memories, but also that of not being listened to, in a space specifically created to listen to her story.

Oral historians, particularly those accessing interviews in secondary archives as I am, need to be cognisant of the ethical ramifications of using other people's interviews. While I cannot control what happened in Erica's interview, I can control how I use it as a scholar and I can respect her agency while doing so. I have chosen to include her story in this paper to demonstrate the importance of listening to narrators and of being cautious about how the interview space and the interviewer-interviewee dynamic can have considerable impact on narrators. In Irene's case, she made a decision to push past her physical and emotional pain to sit with the Shoah Foundation and talk about her Holocaust experiences, including sexual violence. Erica agreed to share her story of sexual violence, but she placed limitations on what she was willing to share. Her agency was not respected in the interview process and her interview demonstrates the vulnerability of oral history interviewees when talking about sensitive subjects.

'And what happened next?': Using emotional interviews in Holocaust research

Oral history as a discipline is necessarily self-reflective. Usually, this involves the interviewer considering their own interview, the ethics involved and their relationship with the interviewee. In the case of my research, I am not the interviewer, but rather a viewer watching on my computer screen twenty years after the interviews were conducted. In using the VHA, I am a further step removed from the interview than other oral historians conducting interviews about difficult subjects. For these other oral historians who are aware of the ethical concerns about asking narrators to detail traumatic experiences, they are personally embedded in the intimate dynamic between interviewer and interviewee. But the secondary viewer, removed in time and space from the interview, has no control over how the interview is conducted, nor the delicate interactions within this space after sexual violence revelations are made. So how can we ethically make use of these interviews?

Holocaust research, by its very nature, is emotional work. All Holocaust testimonies involve asking the narrators to talk about experiences that were traumatic and destructive to their communities, their families

and to themselves. Further, our ability to conduct research on taboo topics such as sexual violence is contingent on survivors voluntarily doing emotional work in interviews and choosing to talk about these experiences. As I discussed earlier in this article, survivor testimonies are the main, and sometimes only, sources historians have that shed light on Jewish women's experiences of sexual violence. As such, it is imperative that we are careful with the interview sources that exist already and when conducting new research with Holocaust survivors about sexual violence.

In the additional interviews I looked at as part of my larger project almost every single interviewee initiated the conversation about sexual violence themselves. These were experiences they deliberated on and decided to bring up in their interview. Many emphasised the importance of having their story 'on the historical record'. They made very deliberate decisions to talk about their difficult memories because they saw that these stories were not present in most scholarship and representations of the Holocaust. Irma M., for instance, forcefully insisted on telling her story of sexual assault when an embarrassed interviewer tried to move the discussion along. Leaning forward and pointing an index finger straight at the interviewer she says, 'I want to discuss something else in Switzerland. Okay?... I must put this in because I think it's important.'<sup>41</sup> We should not be afraid to use interviews that include taboo stories because that also removes agency from these women who made the difficult decision to share experiences, despite their discomfort and the emotional toll it took on them. As Irma and hundreds of other women like her make clear, what happened to them was important and should be included in historical understandings of the Holocaust. Several women mentioned feeling angry and unrecognised by the lack of discussion in historical scholarship about sexual violence against Jewish women. Luba M. speaks with frustration about never being able to find reference to the mass rapes by Soviet soldiers of women in liberated concentration camps: 'somebody [should] write about it and say something about it!'<sup>42</sup> She believes talking about her attempted rape will provide a more accurate representation of the war and liberation. These women are aware that discourse about the past is often controlled by historians.<sup>43</sup> Survivors sometimes explain that giving testimony is a way not only to object to existing scholarly work that has marginalised their experiences, but also to actively influence future scholarship because their Shoah Foundation Institute stories may be used in historical work. Talking about sexual violence in their Holocaust interview was a way to assert their own agency and to actively participate in the creation of histories about Jewish women during the Holocaust.

The Shoah Foundation Institute's Visual History Archive is a repository filled with emotion. Testimonies

about sexual violence during the Holocaust demonstrate that ‘what happened next’ – after the assault, and after the disclosure of sexual violence in an interview – is complicated by both the tumult of the memories and the interview circumstances themselves. The four interviews discussed in this paper are examples of anguish, disgust, discomfort, guilt and sorrow. Esther, Eva, Irene and Erica all shared their stories with the Shoah Foundation in order to have their experiences of sexual violence on the record and to ensure their story is told in its entirety.

Emotions and feelings about sexual violence are woven into the broader narratives of their Holocaust experiences. For Esther, these emotions are visceral and connect to her sense of identity. The memory of her assault is clearly imprinted upon her body and retelling this story also brings the reminder of her perpetrator’s violent touch. Eva’s experience demonstrates how memories of sexual violence can be closely intertwined with other key memories of the Holocaust. Remembering her sister and her cruel separation from her necessitates remembering the assault she suffered at the hands of a trusted family friend, all while in the desperate circumstances of a cattle car bound for Auschwitz. The direct link between her assault and her sister’s death means that this memory is infused with feelings of guilt for Eva. In both of these testimonies, the emotions of the past are still very clearly present for the two women remembering their assaults in the 1990s, and although they may have processed their experiences in the intervening years, the emotions felt about these events are still raw and powerful in their interviews.

Emotions can also be created within the interview space. Irene’s story demonstrates how even the contemplation of remembering sexual violence, and her Holocaust experiences more generally, can bring back floods of memories buried decades earlier. Finally, Erica’s interview is a stark example of the role the interviewer plays as an active participant in the construction of the interview and the responsibility interviewers have to not only listen to their interviewee, but also to be cognisant of the emotional damage that can be wrought in a quest for a detailed interview when dealing with sensitive topics.

These stories demonstrate the importance of attempting to understand emotion not only in terms of the events they are describing, but also how emotion affects the narration of these events many years later and how the act of giving testimony can create new emotions within the interview space. We must be both aware and cautious of the power of emotion within difficult testimonies in order to conduct and use our interviews effectively, and to ensure our narrators are not emotionally harmed by our practice.

**This article has been peer reviewed.**

## Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the two anonymous reviewers and the editors for their thoughtful insights into this article.

## Endnotes

- 1 Kirsty Chatwood argues for a consideration of the context of genocide when discussing sexual violence during the Holocaust. See Kirsty Chatwood, ‘(Re)-Interpreting Stories of Sexual Violence: The Multiple Testimonies of Lucile Eichengreen,’ in Esther Hertzog, ed, *Life, Death and Sacrifice: Women and Family in the Holocaust*, Gefen Books, Jerusalem, 2008, p. 162.
- 2 Birgit Beck, ‘Rape: The Military Trials of Sexual Crimes Committed by Soldiers in the *Wehrmacht*, 1939-1945,’ in *Home/Front: The Military, War and Gender in Twentieth Century Germany*, ed. Karen Hagemann and Stefanie Schüler-Springorum, Berg, Oxford, 2002, pp. 255–73; Birgit Beck, ‘Sexual Violence and its Prosecution by Courts Martial of the *Wehrmacht*,’ in *A World of Total War: Global Conflict and the Politics of Destruction, 1937-1945*, ed. Roger Chickering, Cambridge University Press, Washington, D.C., 2005, pp. 317–31; Birgit Beck, *Wehrmacht und sexuelle Gewalt: Sexualverbrechen vor deutschen Militärgerichten, 1939-1945*, Ferdinand Schöningh, Paderborn, 2004; Monika Flaschka, ‘Race, Rape and Gender In Nazi-Occupied Territories’, PhD Diss., Kent State University, 2009. In *Nazi-Occupied Territories*; David Raub Snyder, *Sex Crimes Under the Wehrmacht*, University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln, 2002.
- 3 Examples of survivor memoirs that explore sexual violence and gendered themes include Livia E. Bitton Jackson, *elli: Coming of Age in the Holocaust*, Harper Collins, London, 1994; Jagna Boraks, *Garden of Steel*, Ekstasis Editions, Victoria, 1993; Lillian Boraks-Nemetz, *The Old Brown Suitcase*, Ben-Simon Publications, 1994; Charlotte Delbo, *Auschwitz and After*, trans. Rosette C. Lamont New Haven: Yale University Press, Brentwood Bay, 1985; Lucille Eichengreen, *Rumkowski and the Orphans of Łódź*, with Rebecca Camhi Fromer, Mercury House, San Francisco, 2000; Lucille Eichengreen, *From Ashes to Life: My Memories of the Holocaust*, with Harriet Hyman Chamberlain, Mercury House, San Francisco, 1994; Ruth Elias, *Triumph of Hope: From Theresienstadt and Auschwitz to Israel*, trans. Margot Bettauer Dembo, John Wiley & Sons, New York, 1998; Fania Fénelon, *Playing for Time*, with Marcelle Routier, trans. Judith Landry, New York: Atheneum, 1977; Judith Magyar Isaacson, *Seed of Sarah: Memoirs of a Survivor*, University of Illinois Press, Chicago, 1990; Cecilie Klein, *Sentenced to Life: A Survivor’s Memoir*, Holocaust Library, New York, 1988; Isabella Leitner, *Fragments of Isabella: A Memoir of Auschwitz*, ed. Irving A. Leitner, Thomas Y. Crowell Publishers, New York, 1978; Olga Lengyel, *Five Chimneys*, Ziff-Davis Publishing Company, Chicago, 1947; Nina Markovna, *Nina’s Journey: A Memoir of Stalin’s Russia and the Second World War*, Regnery Gateway, Washington, D.C., 1989; Gisela Perl, *I Was A Doctor in Auschwitz*, International University Press, New York, 1948; Leonard Tushnet, *The Pavement of Hell*, St Martin’s Press, New York, 1972.
- 4 USC Shoah Foundation Institute, ‘Preserving the Visual History Archive,’ available from <http://sfi.usc.edu/explore/preservation>, accessed 3 September 2014.
- 5 For a detailed and critical analysis of the VHA, see Noah Shenker, *Reframing Holocaust Testimony*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 2015.

- 6 USC Shoah Foundation Institute, 'Interviewer Guidelines,' available from <http://sfi.usc.edu/vha/indexing>, accessed 22 November 2015, p. 3. The volunteers were all paid a stipend of US\$50 per interview. Bernard Weinraub, 'Spielberg Recording Holocaust Testimony,' *The New York Times*, 10 November 1994.
- 7 Shenker, *Reframing Holocaust Testimony*, 119.
- 8 Christopher R. Browning, *Remembering Survival: Inside a Nazi Slave-Labor Camp*, W. W. Norton and Company, New York, 2010, p. 5.
- 9 This paper will only examine testimonies of female survivors. My larger project examined sexual violence against Jewish women and girls, and I did not include analysis of male testimonies. This was for two reasons. The first is the large volume of testimonies I already had for women survivors (989 in English) compared to a much smaller number from male survivors. Secondly, it became clear early in the project that Jewish men's memories of sexual violence were very different not only in the way they experienced sexual violence, but also in language choices, psychological reactions, the ways men interpreted and applied meaning to their own experiences, and in the gendered cultural discourses surrounding sexual violence against men as opposed to that against women. It became evident that the stories of male survivors of sexual violence during the Holocaust could not be given satisfactory attention in this project, so I limited the focus to Jewish women and female children. My next project will be an exploration male experiences of sexual violence and a gendered analysis of men's memories of the Holocaust.
- 10 This included two categories of keywords: 'rape and sexual molestation' and 'coerced sexual activity' (including permutations of these two categories, such as 'rape and sexual molestation in ghettos').
- 11 For example, see the following notable works: Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, *Testimony: Crisis of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis and History*, Routledge, New York, 1991; Henry Greenspan, *On Listening to Holocaust Survivors: Beyond Testimony*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed, Paragon House, St Paul, 2010; Lawrence L. Langer, *Holocaust Testimonies: The Ruins of Memory*, Yale University Press, New Haven, 1991.
- 12 Langer, *Ruins of Memory*, xv.
- 13 See a previous publication of mine that also discusses Esther's testimony. Annabelle Baldwin, 'Sexual Violence and the Holocaust: Reflections on Memory and Witness Testimony,' *Holocaust Studies: A Journal of Culture and History* 16, no. 3 (2010): 112–34.
- 14 See Felicja Karay, 'Death Comes in Yellow': *Skarżysko-Kamienna Slave-Labor Camp*, trans. Sara Kitai, Harwood Academic, Amsterdam, 1995; Felicja Karay, 'Women in the Forced-Labor Camps,' in Dalia Ofer and Lenore J. Weitzman, eds, *Women in the Holocaust*, Yale University Press, New York, 1998, pp. 285–309.
- 15 For more about Fritz Bartenschlager's widespread sexual abuse of Jewish female prisoners in Skarżysko-Kamienna, see Felicja Karay, 'Women in the Forced-Labor Camps', pp. 290–91; Felicja Karay, *Death Comes in Yellow*, pp. 80–81
- 16 Felicja Karay, 'Women in the Forced-Labor Camps' pp. 287–88. I use the term 'molested' to mean non-consensual sexual contact without penetration.
- 17 Esther G. (23436), 17 November 1996, Shoah Foundation Institute Oral Testimony, tape 6, 2.00-15.00.
- 18 Esther G. (23436), tape 6, 10.00-11.00.
- 19 Dan Sipe, 'The Future of Oral History and Moving Images', in Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson eds, *The Oral History Reader*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed, Routledge, London, 2006, p. 409.
- 20 Catalina M. Arata, 'Coping with Rape: The Roles of Prior Sexual Abuse and Attributions of Blame', *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, vol. 14, no. 1, 1999, pp. 62-78.
- 21 Eva G. (2723), 25 May 1995, Shoah Foundation Institute Oral Testimony, tape 2, 18.00-25.00.
- 22 Eva G. (2723), tape 2, 21.00-21.30.
- 23 Eva G. (2723), tape 2, 24.00-25.00
- 24 Eva G. (2723), tape 2, 22.00-25.00.
- 25 Joan Ringelheim, 'The Split Between Gender and the Holocaust,' in Ofer and Weitzman, *Women in the Holocaust*, pp. 340–50.
- 26 Irene B. (28053), 8 April 1997, Shoah Foundation Institute Oral Testimony, tape 3, 13.00-27.00; tape 4 0.30-2.30; tape 5, 4.00-5.00, 12.00-17.00.
- 27 Irene B. (28053), tape 5, 12.00-17.00.
- 28 Irene B. (28053), tape 5, 16.30-17.00.
- 29 Sean Field, 'Beyond "healing": Trauma, oral history and regeneration', *Oral History*, vol. 34, no. 1, (Spring 2006), pp. 31–42.
- 30 Valerie Raleigh Yow, *Recording Oral History: A Guide for the Humanities and Social Sciences*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition, Rowman & Littlefield, Lanham, 2015, pp.108–22.
- 31 For instance, see Henry Greenspan, 'From testimony to recounting: Reflections from forty years of listening to Holocaust survivors', in Steven High, ed, *Beyond Testimony and Trauma: Oral History in the Aftermath of Mass Violence*, UBC Press, Vancouver, 2015, p. 147; Daniel James, 'Listening in the cold: The practice of oral history in an Argentinian meatpacking community', in Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson, eds, *The Oral History Reader*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition, Routledge, London, 2016, pp. 73–91; Popular Memory Group, "Popular memory: Theory, politics, method," in Perks and Thomson, *The Oral History Reader*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, p. 52; Alessandro Portelli, *The Death of Luigi Trastulli and Other Stories: Form and Meaning in Oral History*, State University of New York, Albany, 1991, p. 56.
- 32 Erica C. (33315), 18 September 1997, Shoah Foundation Institute Oral Testimony, tape 2, 0.20-3.00.
- 33 Erica C. (33315), tape 2, 16.20-17.30. This tension is well illustrated in Claude Lanzmann's documentary film *Shoah*, where he pushed *Sonderkommando* survivor Abraham Bomba to recount how he cut the hair of the Jews arriving at Treblinka before they were gassed. Claude Lanzmann (dir.), *Shoah*, 1985. For criticism of this scene and the ethics involved, see Raul Hilberg, *Sources of Holocaust Research: An Analysis*, Ivan R. Dee, Chicago, 2001, pp. 169–70.
- 34 USC Shoah Foundation Institute, 'Interviewer Guidelines,' available from <http://sfi.usc.edu/vha/indexing>, accessed 22 November 2015, 10. Emphasis in the original.
- 35 Dawn Skorczewski, "'You want me to sing?': Holocaust testimonies in the intersubjective field', *Dapim: Studies on the Holocaust*, vol. 32, no. 2, 2018, pp. 119–21.
- 36 Skorczewski, 'You want me to sing?', p. 120.

- 37 For more on this, see Michael Frisch's work on shared authority: Michael Frisch, *A shared authority: Essays on the Craft and Meaning of Oral and Public History*, State University of New York, Albany, 1990.
- 38 Anna Sheftel and Stacy Zembrzycki, 'Who's afraid of oral history? Fifty years of debates and anxiety about ethics', *The Oral History Review*, vol. 43, no. 2, 2016, pp. 338–66.
- 39 Henry Greenspan, 'The unsaid, the incommunicable, the unbearable, and the irretrievable', *The Oral History Review*, vol. 41, no. 2, 2014, pp. 230–31.
- 40 For an illuminating discussion on the ability of interviewers to further silence survivors of sexual violence, see Linda Alcoff and Laura Gray, 'Survivor discourse: Transgression or recuperation?', *Signs*, vol. 18, no. 2, Winter 1993, pp. 260–90.
- 41 Irma M. (45616), 4 September 1998, Shoah Foundation Institute Oral Testimony, tape 3, 18.30-19.00.
- 42 Luba M. (7784), 20 October 1995, Shoah Foundation Institute Oral Testimony, tape 3, 3.50-5.30.
- 43 Portelli, *Death of Luigi Trastulli*, p. 56.